

NEWS FROM THE DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL

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DNREC Boating Safety Office urges boaters to follow good safety practices during Memorial Day weekend, all summer long

With the 2010 summer season making its debut next weekend and plenty of good weather ahead, many boaters will be heading out on the water. As they do, however, the DNREC Office of Boating Safety encourages them to remember to practice safe boating over Memorial Day weekend – and all summer long.

“Delaware consistently has one of the lowest boating accident rates in the country. Last year, we had only one boating-related fatality and 18 reportable boating accidents. That’s good – but we’d still like to see those numbers go down. Though some accidents are unavoidable, we need everyone on our waterways to be alert, use common sense and avoid actions that will put themselves, their passengers and other boaters at risk,” said Sgt. Greg Rhodes, the Boating Safety office’s boating education specialist. This year so far in Delaware, five boating accidents have been reported, with two fatalities, he added.

Recent statistics from the U.S. Coast Guard show the top five primary contributing factors for boating accidents are careless/reckless operation, operator inattention, no proper lookout, operator inexperience and passenger/skier behavior. Alcohol use is the leading contributing factor in fatal boating accidents and was listed as the leading factor in 17 percent of the 709 boating-related fatalities reported nationwide in 2008, the most recent year for which Coast Guard statistics are available.

“Drinking while boating is a choice. The best way to minimize the risk of an accident is to make the wise choice – don’t drink and boat,” said Sgt. Rhodes, noting that boaters should plan ahead to have a non-drinking designated boat operator aboard if alcohol is being consumed.

While it is not illegal for recreational boat operators to consume alcohol, the same blood alcohol limit used to measure intoxication in automobile drivers applies to boat operators: 0.08 or above is legally intoxicated, Rhodes added, noting boat operators found to be at or over the limit face fines and potential jail time, as well as putting themselves and their passengers at risk.

Statistics also support the vital role of wearing life jackets in keeping boaters safe. According to Coast Guard data, more than two-thirds of those killed in boating accidents in 2008 were drowning victims – and 90 percent of them were not wearing life jackets. In addition, capsizing and falling overboard were the most reported types of fatal accidents.

“Boating accidents can happen very fast – and there’s no time to reach for a stowed life jacket and put it on. Like seatbelts in automobiles, we know without question that life jackets save lives. Today’s life jackets are also more effective, more comfortable and even more fashionable than in the past, so there’s simply no reason not to use them,” Sgt. Rhodes said. “In addition, Delaware law requires that

children age 12 and younger wear a life jacket while underway in any vessel on Delaware waters. Though life jackets are not legally required for adults, they should also wear them, especially those with limited swimming skills.”

Taking a boating safety course can also improve your skills and reduce the chances of an accident. Coast Guard statistics show that where instructional data was available, 85 percent of reported fatalities occurred on boats where the operator had not received boating safety instruction.

Delaware’s Office of Boating Safety provides volunteer instructors to private and non-profit organizations, schools, clubs and the public to educate boaters on skills and seamanship and to encourage them to be safe, knowledgeable and responsible. Courses are offered free of charge, including materials and educational aids.

Under Delaware law, all persons born on or after Jan. 1, 1978 must successfully complete a boating safety course in order to operate a boat in Delaware waters, including personal watercraft, Rhodes noted. “We recommend that everyone who is going to operate a boat in Delaware waters take a safety course first, regardless of their age,” he added.

In 2008, the number of boating accidents and injuries reported nationwide decreased slightly, with 4,789 accidents and 3,331 injuries, compared to 5,191 accidents and 3,673 injuries in 2007. However, the number of boating-related fatalities increased slightly, from 685 in 2007 to 709 in 2008, as did property damage, from \$53 million to approximately \$54 million.

For more information on Delaware’s boating safety education courses, please visit www.fw.delaware.gov/Boating/BoatingSafety.htm or contact Sgt. Greg Rhodes at 302-739-9913 or email gregory.rhodes@state.de.us.